

Guided opportunities on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Rick Johnston



Fishing with a drift boat guide in the Kenai River Canyon, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Photo Credit: Rick Johnston

With frequent reporting of challenging conditions facing the United States economy, it should come as no surprise to Kenai Peninsula residents that tourism and travel may be considerably off for the 2009 visitor season.

According to many reports, various sectors of Alaska business have been less affected than the “Lower48;” however, it is becoming clear that Kenai Peninsula visitation and guided bookings have been affected.

A majority of guided trips come from out-of-state and out-of-area visitors. Out-of-state and international travelers to the Kenai Peninsula have been steadily increasing in recent years.

As part of my job with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I am in charge of issuing special-use permits for commercial visitor services. Persons who conduct visitor services on the Refuge are required to obtain a permit and meet specific requirements for licensing, skill, liability insurance, and safety. Some guide services are limited and are awarded by competitive proposals. The high skill level of guides competing for certain guide areas presents me with some tough choices among first-class contenders.

Considering the contribution to Refuge recreation opportunities and the local economy, it is unfortunate that new guides and even long-time guides will be in for a difficult year. New guide applications were fewer this spring with many new guides deciding to

delay start-up proposals. Although annual turnover is common, 2009 seems to stand out with significantly fewer proposals. Refuge guide permits are four percent fewer for 2009, a trend counter to an overall twenty eight percent increase between 2000 and 2008.

Many Kenai NWR guides also obtain sportfishing guide permits from Alaska State Parks due to the co-operative programs associated with the Kenai River.

According to Pam Russell, who is a Natural Resources Specialist for the Kenai River Special Management Area, bookings are off 30 to 40% for Kenai River guides. Newer guides have reported an even greater drop in business with a drop in referrals.



A school group being guided on complimentary Upper Kenai River float trip.

Photo Credit: Rick Johnston

Ms. Russell reported that only 290 sport fishing guides have obtained permits so far in 2009, down from 380 in 2008. She also said that some long-time guided sport fishing businesses appeared to be downsizing their number of assistants because of fewer bookings.

There may be a silver lining for Kenai Peninsula residents in the booking slowdown. An increasing number of guides are reportedly offering incentives for June and August bookings. Some guides are even offering reduced prices or 2-for-1 client trips. This type of marketing strategy may assist with their economic survival while encouraging local residents to

book a guided Refuge trip with their favorite guide. Local residents can throw these local guide businesses an economic lifeline while having a great Refuge experience. By enlisting the services of a guide for friends and family this season, local residents could take advantage of a great value while experiencing a new activity. Or perhaps there is that dad out there who would just like to take a break from “skipper duty.”

Although I own two power boats, a canoe and raft, and have been fishing Refuge waters for over thirty years, I would say that there is nothing quite like getting to sit back and experience a guided trip... particularly when you are the one who has been the “captain” on the family outings.

Going on a guided trip with a Refuge guide can also refresh your local fishing and equipment knowledge, or even give you new material for fish stories or tall tales. It may be difficult when you fish only a few days a month to keep up to date on fish movements and daily hot spots. Tapping the knowledge, equipment techniques, and savvy of a guide can be a really a smart choice for experienced fisherman and a relatively inexpensive lesson for a new one.

Guides on the Kenai have come along way from simply being good fishermen to being well-rounded guides for visitors seeking information and quality outdoor recreation. In the past more than a few guides knew little about the Kenai Peninsula and even less about the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

I recall going on a Deep Creek halibut charter with a guide before the tractor concessions were instituted. He was experimenting with a technique using two Chevy Suburbans to launch a twenty six foot boat at Deep Creek beach. We had a large party and needed a larger boat. He was an OK fishing guide though lacking in other areas. He knew little local information or place names and was unable to identify Mount Redoubt for my inquiring mother.

Fortunately, the knowledge and experience of

Kenai guides as a group has increased dramatically over the years. However, there is no substitute for asking questions and seeking references before settling on a guide.

Collectively, I have been impressed with the natural history, wildlife and fisheries, refuge, and human history knowledge, as well as old fashion story telling acumen of many of our Refuge guides. In two separate competitive offerings over the previous two years, both successful and unsuccessful proposals were literally bulging with experienced resumes concerning all of these subjects. I loved it that after 30 years on the Kenai, I was still learning something new while reading each guide proposal.

Some Refuge opportunities such as a guided Upper Kenai River canyon float or a drift sport fishing trip are occasions that even the most avid Kenai Peninsula outdoorsman and fisherman seldom experience. It may be far less expensive, safer, and simply more fun to book one of our refuge guides for a canyon trip than to purchase, maintain, and successfully use a drift boat or raft, outboard kicker, etc. for a few times a year. And given that many Lower-48 vacationers who won't be visiting Alaska this year, perhaps 2009 is a good time for local Kenai Peninsula residents to vacation close to home.

And don't forget Father's Day is coming up, (hint)....and I would love to sit back this year and be treated to a hassle-free guided trip on the Kenai NWR.

If you would like information about guided visitor service opportunities, regulations, or other recreational opportunities contact the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters at 262-7021 for information.

Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Permit Specialist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He has worked on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1979. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.